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JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES

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JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES

A POEM

BY

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH



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NOTE

THE invocation on page 15, a few brief passages scattered through Books I and II, and the lyrical interlude in Book III — amounting in all to about one hundred and twenty lines — are from an earlier poem. The other eight or nine hundred lines constituting the context are now printed for the first time.

There are Greek and Syriac versions of the story of Judith and Holofernes which differ essentially from that given in the Apocrypha. It is fable and not history, and in the following narrative the author has taken such liberties with the myth as suited his dramatic purpose. He

has widely departed from precedent in his delineation of Judith, who moves through the Apocrypha a beautiful and cold-blooded abstraction, with scarcely any feminine attribute excepting her religious fervor. The distance between her and Charlotte Corday, humanly speaking, is immeasurable, though their heroic deeds are nearly identical in motive. Judith's character throughout the ancient legend lacks that note of tenderness with which the writer has here attempted to accent her heroism.

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BOOK I

JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES

BOOK I

JUDITH IN THE TOWER

UNHERALDED, like some tornado loosed
Out of the brooding hills, it came to pass
That Holofernes, the Assyrian,
With horse and foot a mighty multitude,
Crostr the Euphrates, ravaging the land
To Esdraëlon, and then hawk-like swoopt
On Bethulia : there his trenches drew,
There his grim engines of destruction set
And stormed the place ; and gave them little rest
Within, till sad their plight was ; for at last
The wells ran low, the stores of barley failed,

And famine crept on them. A wheaten loaf
Was put in this scale and the gold in that,
So scarce was bread. Now were the city streets
Grown loud with lamentation, women's moans
And cries of children ; and one night there came
The plague, with breath as hot as the simoom
That blows the desert sand to flakes of fire.

Yet Holofernes could not batter down
The gates of bronze, nor decent entrance make
With beam or catapult in those tough walls,
Nor with his lighted arrows fire the roofs.
Gnawing his lip, among the tents he strode —
Woe to the slave that stumbled in his path ! —
And cursed the doting gods, who gave no aid,
But slumbered somewhere in their house of cloud.
Still wan-cheeked Famine and red-spotted Pest

Did their fell work ; these twain were his allies.
So he withdrew his men a little way
Into the hill-land, where good water was,
And shade of trees that spread their forkèd boughs
Like a stag's antlers. There he pitched his tents
On the steep slope, and counted the slow hours,
Teaching his heart such patience as he knew.

At midnight, in that second month of siege,
Judith had climbed into a mouldered tower
That looked out on the vile Assyrian camp
Stretched on the slopes beyond an open plain.
Here did she come, of late, to think and pray.
Below her, where the spiral vapors rose,
The army like a witch's caldron seethed.
At times she heard the camels' gurgling moan,
The murmur of men's tongues, and clank of arms

Muffled by distance. Through the tree-stems shone
The scattered watchfires, lurid fiends of night
That with red hands reached up and clutched the dark ;
And now and then as some mailed warrior strode
Into the light, she saw his armor gleam.
The city, with its pestilential breath,
A hive of woes, lay close beneath her feet ;
Above her leaned the sleepless Pleiades.

That night she held long vigil in the tower,
Merari's daughter, dead Manasseh's wife,
Who, since the barley harvest when he died,
Had dwelt three years a widow in her house,
And looked on no man : where Manasseh slept
In his strait sepulchre, there slept her heart.
Yet dear to her, and for his memory dear,

Was Israel, the chosen people, now
How shorn of glory ! Hither had she come
To pray in the still starlight, far from those
Who watched or wept in the sad world below ;
And in the midnight, in the tower alone,
She knelt and prayed as one that doubted not :

“ O, are we not Thy children who of old
Trod the Chaldean idols in the dust,
And built our altars only unto Thee ?
Didst Thou not lead us into Canaan
For love of us, because we spurned the gods ?
Didst Thou not shield us that we worshipped Thee ?
And when a famine covered all the land,
And drove us into Egypt, where the King
Did persecute Thy chosen to the death —
Didst Thou not smite the swart Egyptians then,

And guide us through the bowels of the deep
That swallowed up their horsemen and their King ?

For saw we not, as in a wondrous dream,
The up-tost javelins, the plunging steeds,
The chariots sinking in the wild Red Sea ?

O Lord, Thou hast been with us in our woe,
And from Thy bosom Thou hast cast us forth,
And to Thy bosom taken us again :

For we have built our temples in the hills
By Sinai, and on Jordan's sacred banks,
And in Jerusalem we worship Thee.

O Lord, look down and help us. Stretch Thy hand
And free Thy people. Make our faith as steel,
And draw us nearer, nearer unto Thee."

Then Judith loosed the hair about her brows,
About her brows the long black tresses loosed,

And bent her head, and wept for Israel.
And while she wept, bowed like a lotus flower
That leans to its own shadow in the Nile,
A strangest silence fell upon the land ;
Like to a sea-mist spreading east and west
It spread, and close on this there came a sound
Of snow-soft plumage rustling in the dark,
And voices that such magic whisperings made
As the sea makes at twilight on a strip
Of sand and pebble. Slowly from her knees
Judith arose, but dared not lift her eyes,
Awed with the sense that now beside her stood
A God's white Angel, though she saw him not,
While round the tower a wingèd retinue
In the wind's eddies drifted ; then the world
Crumbled and vanished, and nought else she knew.
The Angel stoopt, and from his luminous brow

And from the branch of amaranth he bore
A gleam fell on her, touching eyes and lips
With light ineffable, and she became
Fairer than morning in Arabia.
On cheek and brow and bosom lay such tint
As in the golden process of mid-June
Creeps up the slender stem to dye the rose.
Then silently the Presence spread his vans.
Like one that from a lethargy awakes
The Hebrew woman started : in the tower
No wingèd thing was, save on a crossbeam
A twittering sparrow ; from the underworld
Came sounds of pawing hoof, and clink of steel ;
And where the black horizon blackest lay
A moment gone, a thread of purple ran
That changed to rose, and then to sudden gold.

And Judith stood bewildered, with flusht cheek
Prest to the stone-work. When she knelt to pray
It was dead night, and now 't was break of dawn ;
Yet had not sleep upon her eyelids set
Its purple seal. In this strange interval
Of void or trance, or slumber-mocking death,
What had befallen ? As a skein of silk,
Dropt by a weaver seated at his loom,
Lies in a tangle, and but knots the more,
And slips the fingers seeking for the clue :
So all her thought lay tangled in her brain,
And what had chanced eluded memory.

Now was day risen ; on the green foothills
Men were in motion, and such life as was
In the sad city dragged itself to light.
Then Judith turned, and slowly down the stair

Descended to the court. Outside the gate,
In the broad sun, lounged Achior, lately fled
From Holofernes ; as she past she spoke :
“ The Lord be with thee, Achior, all thy days.”
And Achior — captain of the Ammonites,
In exile, but befriended of the Jews —
Paused, and looked after her with pensive eyes.
Unknown of any one, these many months
His corselet held a hopeless tender heart
For dead Manasseh’s wife — too fair she was,
And rich — this day how wonderfully fair !
But she, unheedful, crost the tile-paved court,
And passing through an archway reached the place
Where underneath an ancient aloe-tree
Sat Chabris with Ozias and his friend
Charmis, patriarchs of the leaguered town.

There Judith halted, and obeisance made
With hands crost on her breast, as was most meet,
They being aged men and governors.
And as she bent before them where they sate,
They marvelled much that in that stricken town
Was one face left not hunger-pinched, or wan
With grief's acquaintance : such was Judith's face.
And white-haired Charmis looked on her, and said :
"This woman walketh in the light of God."

"Would it were so !" said Judith. "I know not ;
But this I know, that where faith is, is light.
Let us not doubt Him ! If we doubt we die.
O is it true, Ozias, thou hast mind
To yield the city to our enemies
After five days, unless the Lord shall stoop
From heaven to save us ?"

And Ozias said :

“ Our young men perish on the battlements ;
Our wives and children by the empty wells
Lie down and perish.”

“ If we doubt we die.

But whoso trusts in God, as Isaac did,
Though suffering greatly even to the end,
Dwells in a citadel upon a rock ;
Wave shall not reach it, nor fire topple down.”

“ Our young men perish on the battlements,”
Answered Ozias ; “ by the dusty tanks,
Our wives and children.”

“ They shall go and dwell
With Seers and Prophets in eternal life.
Is there no God ? ”

"One only," Chabris spoke,

"But now His face is turned aside from us.

He sees not Israel."

"Is His mercy less

Than Holofernes' ? Shall we place our trust

In this fierce bull of Asshur ? "

"Five days more,"

Said old Ozias, "we shall trust in God."

"Ah ! His time is not man's time," Judith cried,

"And why should we, the dust beneath His feet,

Decide the hour of our deliverance,

Saying to Him : *Thus shalt Thou do, and so ?*

Ozias, thou to whom the heart of man

Is as a scroll illegible, dost thou

Pretend to read the mystery of God ? "

Then gray Ozias bowed his head, abashed,
And spoke not ; but the white-haired Charmis spoke :
“ The woman sayeth wisely. We are wrong
That in our anguish mock the Lord our God,
Staff that we rest on, stream whereat we drink ! ”
And then to Judith : “ Child, what wouldst thou
have ? ”

“ I cannot answer thee, nor make it plain
In my own thought. This night I had a dream
Not born of sleep, for both my eyes were wide,
My sense alive — a vision, if thou wilt,
Of which the scattered fragments in my mind
Are as the fragments of a crystal vase
That, slipping from the slave-girl’s careless hand,
Falls on the marble. No most cunning skill
Shall join the pieces and make whole the vase.

So with my vision. I seem still to hear
Strange voices round me, inarticulate —
Words shaped and uttered by invisible lips ;
At whiles there seems a palm close prest to mine
That fain would lead me somewhere. I know not
What all portends. Some great event is near.
Last night celestial spirits were on wing
Over the city. As I sat alone
Within the tower, upon the stroke of twelve —
Look, look, Ozias ! Charmis, Chabris, look !
See ye not, yonder, a white mailed hand
That with its levelled finger points through air !”

The three old men, with lifted, startled eyes,
Turned, and beheld on the transparent air
A phantom hand in silver gauntlet clad
With stretched forefinger ; and they spake no word,

But in the loose folds of their saffron robes
Their wan and meagre faces muffled up,
And sat there, like those statues which the wind
Near some old city on a desert's edge
Wraps to the brow in cerements of red dust.

After a silence Judith softly said :

“’T is gone ! Fear not ; it was a sign to me,
To me alone. Ozias, didst thou mark
The way it pointed ? — to the Eastern Gate !
Send the guard orders not to stay me there.
O question not ! I but obey the sign.
I must go hence. Before the shadows fall
Upon the courtyard thrice, I shall return,
Else shall men's eyes not look upon me more.
What darkness lies between this hour and that
Tongue may not say. The thing I can I will,

Leaning on God, remembering what befell
Jacob in Syria when he fed the flocks
Of Laban, and how Isaac in his day,
And Abraham, were chastened by the Lord.
Wait thou in patience ; till I come, keep thou
The sanctuaries." And the three gave oath
To hold the town ; and if they held it not,
Then should she find them in the synagogue
Dead near the sacred ark ; the spearmen dead
At the four gates ; upon the battlements
The archers bleaching. " Be it so," she said,
" Yet be it not so ! Shield me with thy prayers !"

Then Judith made obeisance as before,
Past on, and left them pondering her words
And that weird spectre hand in silver mail,
Which, vanishing, had left a moth-like glow

Against the empty, unsubstantial air.

Still were their eyes fixed on it in mute awe.

When Judith gained her room in the dull court,
Where all the houses in the shadow lay
Of the great synagogue, she threw aside
The livery of grief, and in her hair
Braided a thread of opals, on her breasts
Poured precious ointment, and put on the robe
That in a chest of camphor-wood had lain
Unworn since she was wed — the proud silk robe,
Heavy with vine-work, delicate flower and star,
And loopt at the brown shoulder with a pearl
To ransom princes. Had he seen her then,
The sad young captain of the Ammonites,
Had he by chance but seen her as she stood
Clasping her girdle, it had been despair !

Then Judith veiled her face, and took her scarf,
And wrapt the scarf about her, and went forth
Into the street with Marah, the handmaid.
It was the hour when all the wretched folk
Haunted the market-stalls to get such scraps
As famine left ; the rich bazaars were closed,
Those of the cloth-merchants and jewellers ;
But to the booths where aught to eat was had,
The starving crowds converged, vociferous.
Thus at that hour the narrow streets were thronged.
And as in summer when the bearded wheat,
With single impulse leaning all one way,
Follows the convolutions of the wind,
And parts to left or right, as the wind veers :
So went men's eyes with Judith, so the crowd
Parted to give her passage. On she prest
Through noisome lanes where poverty made lair,

By stately marble porticos prest on
To the East Gate, a grill of triple bronze,
That lifted at her word, and then shut down
With horrid clangor. The crude daylight there
Dazed her an instant ; then she set her face
Towards Holofernes' camp in the hill-land.

BOOK II

BOOK II

THE CAMP OF ASSHUR

O SADDENED Muse, sing not of that rough way
Her light feet trod among the flints and thorns,
Where some chance arrow might have stained her
 breast,

And death lay coiled in the slim viper's haunt ;
Nor how the hot sun tracked them till they reached,
She and her maid, a place of drooping boughs
Cooled by a spring set in a cup of moss,
And bathed their cheeks, and gathered mulberries,
And at the sudden crackling of a twig
Were wellnigh dead with fear : sing, rather, now
Of Holofernes, stretched before his tent
Upon the spotted hide of that wild beast

He slew beside the Ganges, he alone
With just his dagger ; from the jungle there
The creature leapt on him, and tore his throat,
In the dim starlight : that same leopard skin
Went with him to all wars. This day he held
A council of the chiefs. Close at his feet
His iron helmet trailed on the sere grass
Its horsehair plume — a Hindu maiden's hair,
Men whispered under breath ; and from his lance,
The spear set firmly in the sun-scorched earth
Where he had thrust it, hung his massive shield.
Upon the shield a dragon was, with eyes
Of sea-green emeralds, which caught the light
And flashed it back, and seemed a thing that lived.

There lay the Prince of Asshur, with his chin
Propt on one hand, and the gaunt captains ranged

In groups about him ; men from Kurdistan,
Men from the Indus, and the salt-sea dunes,
And those bleak snow-lands that to northward lie —
A motley conclave, now in hot debate
Whether to press the siege or wait the end.
And one said : “ Lo ! the fruit is ripe to fall,
Let us go pluck it ; better to lie dead,
Each on his shield, than stay here with no grain
To feed the mares, and no bread left.” “ The moat
Is wide,” said one, “ and many are the spears,
And stout the gates. Have we not tried our men
Against the well-set edges of those spears ?
Note how the ravens wheel in hungry files
Above the trenches, and straight disappear.
See where they rise, red-beaked and surfeited !
Has it availed ? The city stands. Within
There’s that shall gnaw its heart out, if we wait,

And bide the sovran will of the wise gods."

Some of the younger captains made assent,

But others scowled, and mocked them, and one cried :

"Ye should have tarried by the river's bank

At home, and decked your hair with butterflies

Like the king's wantons. Little use are ye."

"Nay," cried another, "they did well to come ;

They have their uses. When our meat is gone

We'll even feed upon the tender flesh

Of these tame girls, who, though they dress in steel,

Like more the tremor of a cithern string

Than the shrill whistle of an arrowhead."

Death lay in lighter spoken words than these,

And quick hands sought the hilt, and spears were

poised,

And they had one another slain outright,

These fiery lords, when suddenly each blade
Slipt back to sheath, and the pale captains stood
Transfixt, beholding in their very midst
A woman whose exceeding radiance
Of brow and bosom made her garments seem
Threadbare and lustreless, yet whose attire
Outshone the purples of a Persian queen
That decks her for some feast, or makes her rich
To welcome back from war her lord the king.

For Judith, who knew all the hillside paths
As one may know the delicate azure veins
That branch and cross on his belovèd's wrist,
Had past the Tartar guards in the thick wood,
And gained the camp's edge, and there stayed her steps,
Appalled at sight of all those angry lords,
But taking heart, had noiselessly approached,

And stood among them, unperceived till then.
Now on the air arose such murmurous sound
As when a swarm of honey-bees in June
Rises, and hangs mist-like above the hives,
And fills the air with its sweet monotone.
The Prince of Asshur knew not what it meant,
And springing to his feet, thrust back the chiefs
That hampered him, and cried in a loud voice :
“Who breaks upon our councils ?” Then his eyes
Discovered Judith. As in a wild stretch
Of silt and barren rock, a gracious flower,
Born of the seed some bird of passage dropt,
Leans from the stem and with its beauty lights
The lonely waste, so Judith, standing there,
Seemed to illumine all the dismal camp,
And Holofernes’ voice took softer tone :
“Whence comest thou — thy station, and thy name ?”

“Merari’s daughter, dead Manasseh’s wife,
Judith. I come from yonder hapless town.”

“Methought the phantom of some murdered
queen

From the dead years had risen at my feet !
If these Samarian women are thus shaped,
O my brave captains, let not one be slain ! —
What seekest thou within the hostile lines
Of Asshur ? ”

“Holofernes.”

“This is he.”

“O good my lord,” cried Judith, “if indeed
Thou art that Holofernes whom I seek,

And dread, in truth, to find, low at thy feet
Behold thy handmaid who in fear has flown
From a doomed people."

"If this thing be so,
Thou shalt have shelter of our tents, and food,
And meet observance, though our enemy.
Touching thy people, they with tears of blood,
And ashes on their heads, shall rue the hour
They brought not tribute to the lord of all,
The king at Nineveh. But thou shalt live."

"O good my lord," said Judith, "as thou wilt,
So would thy servant. And I pray thee now
Let them that listen stand awhile aside,
For I have that for thine especial ear
Of import to thee."

Then the chiefs fell back

Under the trees, and leaned on their huge shields,
Eyeing the Hebrew woman whose sweet looks
Brought them home-thoughts and visions of their wives
In that far land they might not see again.
And Judith spoke, and they strained ear to catch
Her words ; but only the soft voice was theirs :

“ My lord, if yet thou holdest in thy thought
The words which Achior the Ammonite
Once spake to thee concerning Israel,
O treasure them ; no guile was in those words.
True is it, master, that our people kneel
To an unseen but not an unknown God :
By day and night He watches over us,
And while we worship Him we cannot fall,
Our tabernacles shall be unprofaned,

Our spears invincible ; but if we sin,
If we transgress the law by which we live,
Our sanctuaries shall be desecrate,
Our tribes thrust forth into the wilderness,
Scourged and accursèd. Therefore, O my lord,
Seeing this nation wander from the faith
Taught of the Prophets, I have fled dismayed.
Heed, Holofernes, what I speak this day,
And if the thing I tell thee prove not true,
Let not thy falchion tarry in its sheath,
But seek my heart. Why should thy handmaid live,
Having deceived thee, thou the crown of men ? ”

She spoke, and paused ; and sweeter on his ear
Was Judith's voice than ever to him seemed
The silver laughter of the Assyrian girls
In the bazaars, or when in the cool night,

After the sultry heat of the long day,
They came down to the river with their lutes.
The ceaseless hum that rose from the near tents,
The neighing of the awful battle-steeds,
The winds that sifted through the fronded palms
He heard not ; only Judith's voice he heard.

“ O listen, Holofernes, my sweet lord,
And thou shalt rule not only Bethulfa,
Rich with its hundred altars' crusted gold,
But Cades-Barne and Jerusalem,
And all the vast hill-land to the blue sea.
For I am come to give into thy hand
The key of Israel — Israel now no more,
Since she disowns the Prophets and her God.”

“ Speak, for I needs must listen to these things.”

“ Know then, O prince, it is our yearly use
To lay aside the first fruits of the grain,
And so much oil, so many skins of wine,
Which, being sanctified, are held intact
For the High Priests who serve before our Lord
In the great temple at Jerusalem.
This holy food — which even to touch is death —
The rulers, sliding from their ancient faith,
Fain would lay hands on, being wellnigh starved ;
And they have sent a runner to the Priests
(The Jew Abijah, who, at dead of night,
Shot like a javelin between thy guards),
Bearing a parchment begging that the Church
Yield them permit to eat the sacred corn.
But 't is not lawful they should do this thing,
Yet will they do it. Then shalt thou behold
The archers tumbling headlong from the walls,

Their strength gone from them ; thou shalt see the
spears

Splitting like reeds within the spearmen's hands,
And the strong captains tottering like old men
Stricken with palsy. Then, O mighty prince,
Then with thy trumpets blaring doleful dooms,
And thy silk banners waving in the wind,
With squares of men and eager clouds of horse
Thou shalt sweep down on them, and strike them
dead !

But now, my lord, before this come to pass,
Three days must wane, for they touch not the food
Until the Jew Abijah shall return
With the Priests' message. Here among thy hosts,
O Holofernes, would I dwell the while,
Asking but this, that I and my handmaid
Each night, at the twelfth hour, may egress have

Unto the valley, there to weep and pray
That God forsake this nation in its sin.
And as my prophecy prove true or false,
So be it with me."

Judith ceased, and stood
With hands crost on her breast, and face upraised.
And Holofernes answered not at first,
But bent his eyes on the uplifted face,
And mused, and then made answer : " Be it so.
Thou shalt be free to go and come, and none
Shall stay thee, nor molest thee, these three days.
And if, O pearl of women, the event
Prove not a dwarf beside the prophecy,
Then hath the sun not looked upon thy like ;
Thy name shall be as honey on men's lips,
And in their memory fragrant as a spice.

Music shall wait on thee ; crowns shalt thou have,
And jewel chests of costly sandal-wood,
And robes in texture like the ring-dove's throat,
And milk-white mares, and slaves, and chariots ;
And thou shalt dwell with me in Nineveh,
In Nineveh, the City of the Gods."

Then on her cheek the ripe blood of her race
Faltered an instant. " Even as thou wilt,
So would thy servant." Thereupon the slaves
Brought meat and wine, and placed them in a tent,
A green pavilion standing separate
Hard by the brook, for Judith and her maid.
But Judith ate not, saying : " Master, no.
It is not lawful that we taste of these ;
My maid has brought a pouch of parchèd corn,
And bread and figs and wine of our own land,

Which shall not fail us." Holofernes said,
"So let it be," and pushing back the screen
Past out, and left them sitting in the tent.

And when they were alone within the tent,
"O Marah," cried the mistress, "do I dream?
Is this the dread Assyrian rumor paints,
He who amid the hills of Ragau smote
The hosts of King Arphaxad, and despoiled
Sidon and Tyrus, and left none unslain?
Gentle is he we thought so terrible,
Whose name we stilled unruly children with
At bedtime — *See! the Bull of Asshur comes!*
And all the little ones would straight to bed.
Is he not statured as should be a king?
Beside our tallest captain this grave prince
Towers like the palm above the olive-tree.

A gentle prince, with gracious words and ways."

And Marah said: "A gentle prince he is —

To look on; I misdoubt his ways and words."

"And I, O Marah, I would trust him not!"

And Judith laid her cheek upon her arm

With a quick laugh, and like to diamonds

Her white teeth shone between the parted lips.

Now Holofernes held himself aloof

That day, spoke little with his chiefs, nor cared

To watch the athletes at their games of strength

Under the cedars, as his custom was,

But in a grove of clustered tamarisk trees

On the camp's outer limit walked alone,

Save for one face that haunted the blue air,

Save for one voice that murmured at his ear.

There, till the twilight flooded the low lands

And the stars came, these kept him company.

The word of Judith's beauty had spread wide
Through the gray city that stretched up the slope ;
And as the slow dusk gathered many came
From far encampments, on some vain pretext,
To pass the green pavilion — long-haired men
That dwelt by the Hydaspes, and the sons
Of the Elymeans, and slim Tartar youths,
And folk that stained their teeth with betel-nut
And wore rough goatskin, herdsmen of the hills ;
But saw not Judith, who from common air
Was shut, and none might gaze upon her face.

But when the night fell, and camps were still,
And nothing moved beneath the icy stars
In their blue bourns, save some tall Kurdish guard
That stalked among the cedars, Judith called
And wakened Marah, and the sentinel

Drew back, and let them pass beyond the lines
Into the plain ; and Judith's heart was full,
Seeing the watchfires burning on the towers
Of her own city. As a hundred years
The hours seemed since she stood within its walls,
Her heart so yearned to it. Here on the sand
The two knelt down in prayer, and Marah thought :
“ How is it we should come so far to pray ? ”
Not knowing Judith's cunning that had gained
By this device free passage to and fro
Between the guards. When they had prayed, they
rose
And went through the black shadows back to camp.

One cresset twinkled dimly in the tent
Of Holofernes, and Bagoas, his slave,
Lay on a strip of matting at the door,

Drunk with the wine of sleep. Not so his lord
On the soft leopard skin ; a fitful sleep
Was his this night, tormented by a dream
That ever waked him. Through the curtained air
A tall and regal figure came and went ;
At times a queen's bright diadem prest down
The bands of perfumed hair, and gold-wrought stuffs
Rustled ; at times the apparition stood
Draught only in a woven mist of veils,
Like the king's dancing-girls at Nineveh.
And once it stole to his couch side, and stooped
And touched his brow with tantalizing lip,
Undoing all the marvel of the dream ;
For Holofernes turned then on the couch,
Sleep fled his eyelids, and would come no more.

BOOK III

BOOK III

THE FLIGHT

ON the horizon, as the prow of Dawn
Ploughed through the huddled clouds, a wave of gold
Went surging up the dark, and breaking there
Dashed its red spray against the cliffs and spurs,
But left the valley in deep shadow still.
And still the mist above the Asshur camp
Hung in white folds, and on the pendent boughs
The white dew hung. While yet no bird had moved
A wing in its dim nest, the wakeful prince
Rose from the couch, and wrapt in his long cloak
Stept over the curved body of the slave,
And thridding moodily the street of tents

Came to the grove of clustered tamarisk trees
Where he had walked and mused the bygone day.
Here on a broken ledge he sat him down,
Soothed by the morning scent of flower and herb
And the cool vintage of the unbreathed air ;
And presently the sleep that night denied
The gray dawn brought him ; and he slept and dreamed

Before him rose the pinnacles and domes
Of Nineveh ; he walked the streets, and heard
The chatter of the merchants in the booths
Pricing their wares, the water-seller's cry,
The flower-girl's laugh — a festival it seemed,
In honor of some conqueror or god,
For cloths of gold and purple tissues hung
From frieze and peristyle, and cymbals clashed,
And the long trumpets sounded : now he breathed

The airs of a great river sweeping down
Past ruined temples and the tombs of kings,
And heard the wash of waves on a vague coast.
Then, in the swift transition of a dream,
He found himself in a damp catacomb
Searching by torchlight for his own carved name
On a sarcophagus ; and as he searched
A group of wailing shapes drew slowly near —
The hates and cruel passions of his youth
Become incorporate and immortal things,
With tongue to blazon his eternal guilt ;
And on him fell strange terror, who had known
Neither remorse nor terror, and he sprang
Upon his feet, and broke from out the spell,
Clutching his sword-hilt ; and before him stood
Bagoas, the eunuch, bearing on his head
An urn just filled at the clear brook hard by.

Then Holofernes could have struck the slave
Dead in his path — what man had ever seen
The Prince of Asshur tremble ? But he turned
Back to the camp, and the slave followed on
At heel, grown sullen also, like a hound
That takes each color of his master's mood.
And when the two had reached the tent, the prince
Halted, and went not in at once, but said :
“Go, fetch me wine, and let my soul make cheer,
For I am sick with visions of the night.”

Within the tent alone, he sat and mused :
“What thing is this hath so unstrung my heart
A foolish dream appalls me ? what dark spell ?
Is it an omen that the end draws nigh ?
Such things foretell the doom of fateful men —
Stars, comets, apparitions hint their doom.

The night before my grandsire got his wound
In front of Memphis, and therewith was dead,
He dreamt a lying Ethiop he had slain
Was strangling him ; and, later, my own sire
Saw death in a red writing on a leaf.
And I, too " — Here Bagoas brought the wine
And set it by him ; but he pushed it back.
" Nay, I 'll not drink it, take away the cup ;
And this day let none vex me with affairs,
For I am ill and troubled in my thought.
Go — no, come hither ! these are my commands :
Search thou the camp for choicest flesh and fruit,
And spread to-night a feast in this same tent,
And hang the place with fragrant-smelling boughs
Or such wild flowers as hide in the ravine ;
Then bid the Hebrew woman that she come
To banquet with us. As thou lovest life,

Bring her ! What matters, when the strong gods
call,

Whether they find a man at feast or prayer ? ”

Bagoas bowed him to his master's foot
With hidden cynic smile, and went his way
To spoil the camp of such poor food as was,
And gather fragrant boughs to dress the tent,
Sprigs of the clove and sprays of lavender ;
And meeting Marah with her water jar
At the brookside, delivered his lord's word.
Then Judith sent him answer in this wise :
“ O what am I that should gainsay my lord ? ”
And Holofernes found the answer well.
“ Were this not so,” he mused, “ would not my name
Be as a jest and gibe 'mong womankind ?
Maidens would laugh behind their unbound hair.”

“O Marah, see ! my lord keeps not his word.
He is as those false jewellers who change
Some rich stone for a poorer, when none looks.
Three days he promised, and not two are gone !”
Thus Judith said, and smiled, but in her heart :
“O save me, Lord, from this dark cruel prince,
And from mine own self save me ; for this man,
A worshipper of fire and senseless stone,
Slayer of babes upon the mother’s breast,
He, even he, hath by some conjurer’s trick,
Or by his heathen beauty, in me stirred
Such pity as stays anger’s lifted hand.
O let not my hand falter, in Thy name !”
And thrice that day, by hazard left alone,
Judith bowed down, upon the broidered mats
Bowed down in shame and wretchedness, and prayed :
“Since Thou hast sent the burden, send the strength !

O Thou who lovest Israel, give me strength
And cunning such as never woman had,
That my deceit may be his stripe and scar,
My kiss his swift destruction. This for thee,
My city, Bethulia, this for thee !”

Now the one star that ruled the night-time then,
Against the deep blue-blackness of the sky
Took shape, and shone ; and Judith at the door
Of the pavilion waited for Bagoas ;
She stood there lovelier than the night's one star.
But Marah, looking on her, could have wept,
For Marah's soul was troubled, knowing all
That had been hidden from her till this hour.
The deadly embassy that brought them there,
And the dark moment's peril, now she knew.
But Judith smiled, and whispered, “ It is well ; ”
And later, paling, whispered, “ Fail me not ! ”

Then came Bagoas, and led her to the tent
Of Holofernes, and she entered in
And knelt before him in the cressets' light
Demurely like a slave-girl at the feet
Of her new master, whom she fain would please,
He having paid a helmetful of gold
That day for her upon the market-place,
And would have paid a hundred pieces more.
So Judith knelt ; and the dark prince inclined
Above her graciously, and bade her rise
And sit with him on the spread leopard skin.
Yet she would not, but rose, and let her scarf
Drift to her feet, and stood withdrawn a space,
Bright in her jewels ; and so stood, and seemed
Like some rich idol that a general,
Sacking a town, finds in a marble niche
And sets among the pillage in his tent.

“Nay, as thou wilt, O fair Samaritan !”

Thus Holofernes, “thou art empress here.”

“Not queen, not empress would I be, O prince,”

Judith gave answer, “only thy handmaid,

And one not well content to share her charge.”

Then Judith came to his couch side, and said :

“This night, O prince, no other slave than I

Shall wait on thee with meat and fruit and wine,

And bring the scented water for thy hands,

And spread the silvered napkin on thy knee.

So subtle am I, I shall know thy thought

Before thou thinkest, and thy spoken word

Ere thou canst speak it. Let Bagoas go

This night among his people, save he fear

To lose his place and wage, through some one else

More trained and skilful showing his defect !”

Prince Holofernes smiled upon her mirth,
Finding it pleasant. "O Bagoas," he cried,
"Another hath usurpt thee. Get thee gone,
Son of the midnight ! But stray not from camp,
Lest the lean tiger-whelps should break their fast,
And thou forget I must be waked at dawn."

So when Bagoas had gone into the night,
Judith set forth the viands for the prince ;
Upon a stand at the low couch's side
Laid grapes and apricots, and poured the wine,
And while he ate she held the jewelled cup,
Nor failed to fill it to the silver's edge
Each time he drank ; and the red vintage seemed
More rich to him because of her soft hands
And the gold bangle that slipt down her wrist.
Now, in the compass of his thirty years
In no one day had he so drank of wine.

The opiate breath of the half-wilted flowers
And the gray smoke that from the cressets curled
Made the air dim and heavy in the tent ;
And the prince drowsed, and through the curtained
mist,
As in his last night's vision, came and went
The tall and regal figure : now he saw,
Outlined against the light, a naked arm
Bound near the shoulder by a hoop of gold,
And now a sandal flashed, with jewels set.
Through half-shut lids he watched her come and go,
This Jewish queen that was somehow his slave ;
And once he leaned to her, and felt her breath
Upon his cheek like a perfumèd air
Blown from a far-off grove of cinnamon ;
Then at the touch shrank back, but knew not why,
Moved by some instinct deeper than his sense.

At last all things lost sequence in his mind ;
And in a dream he saw her take the lute
And hold it to her bosom while she sang ;
And in a dream he listened to the song —
A folklore legend of an ancient king,
The first on earth that ever did taste wine,
Who drank, and from him cast a life-long grief
As 't were a faded mantle. Like a mist
The music drifted from the silvery strings :

“ The small green grapes in heavy clusters grew,
Feeding on mystic moonlight and white dew
And amber sunshine, the long summer through ;

“ Till, with faint tremor in her veins, the Vine
Felt the delicious pulses of the wine ;
And the grapes ripened in the year's decline.

“ And day by day the Virgins watched their charge !
And when, at last, beyond the horizon’s marge,
The harvest-moon droopt beautiful and large,

“ The subtle spirit in the grape was caught,
And to the slowly dying monarch brought
In a great cup fantastically wrought.

“ Of this he drank ; then forthwith from his brain
Went the weird malady, and once again
He walked the palace, free of scar or pain —

“ But strangely changed, for somehow he had lost
Body and voice : the courtiers, as he crost
The royal chambers, whispered — *The King’s ghost !* ”

The ceasing of the music broke the drowse,

Half broke the drowse, of the dazed prince, who
cried :

“Give me the drink ! and thou, take thou the cup !

Fair Judith, 't is a medicine that cures ;

Grief will it cure and every ill, save love,”

And as he spoke, he stoopt to kiss the hand

That held the chalice ; but the cressets swam

In front of him, and all within the tent

Grew strange and blurred, and from the place he sat

He sank, and fell upon the camel-skins,

Supine, inert, bound fast in bands of wine.

And Judith looked on him, and pity crept

Into her bosom. The ignoble sleep

Robbed not his pallid brow of majesty

Nor from the curved lip took away the scorn ;

These rested still. Like some Chaldean god

Thrown from its fane, he lay there at her feet.

O broken sword of proof ! O prince betrayed !

Her he had trusted, he who trusted none.

The sharp thought pierced her, and her breast was torn,

And half she longed to bid her purpose die,

To stay, to weep, to kneel down at his side

And let her long hair trail upon his face.

Then Judith dared not look upon him more,

Lest she should lose her reason through her eyes ;

And with her palms she covered up her eyes

To shut him out ; but from that subtler sight

Within, she could not shut him, and so stood.

Then suddenly there fell upon her ear

The moan of children moaning in the streets,

And throngs of famished women swept her by,

Wringing their wasted hands, and all the woes

Of the doomed city pleaded at her heart.
As if she were within the very walls
These things she heard and saw. With hurried breath
Judith blew out the lights, all lights save one,
And from its nail the heavy falchion took,
And with both hands tight claspt upon the hilt
Thrice smote the Prince of Asshur as he lay,
Thrice on his neck she smote him as he lay,
Then from her flung the cruel curvèd blade
That in the air an instant flashed, and fell.

Outside stood Marah, waiting, as was planned,
And Judith whispered: "It is done. Do thou!"
Then Marah turned, and went into the tent,
And pulled the hangings down about the corse,
And in her mantle wrapt the brazen head,
And brought it with her. A loud gong struck twelve



As the two women past the silent guard ;
With measured footstep past, as if to prayer.
But on the camp's lone edge fear gave them wing,
And glancing not behind, they fled like wraiths
Through the hushed night into the solemn woods,
Where, from gnarled roots and palsied trees, black
 shapes
Rose up, and seemed to follow them ; and once
Some creature startled in the underbrush
Made cry, and froze the blood about their hearts.
Across the plain, with backward-streaming hair
And death-white face, they fled, until at last
They reached the rocky steep upon whose crest
The gray walls loomed through vapor. This they
 clomb,
Wild with the pregnant horrors of the night,
And flung themselves against the city gates.

Hushed as the grave lay all the Asshur camp,
Bound in that sleep which seals the eyes at dawn
With double seals, when from the outer waste
An Arab scout rushed on the morning watch
With a strange story of a head that hung,
Newly impaled there, on the city wall.
He had crept close upon it through the fog,
And seen it plainly, set on a long lance
Over the gate — a face with snake-like curls,
That seemed a countenance that he had known
Somewhere, sometime, and now he knew it not,
To give it name ; but him it straightway knew,
And turned, and stared with dumb recognizance
Till it was not in mortal man to stay
Confronting those dead orbs that mimicked life.
On this he fled, and he could swear the thing,
Disjoined by magic from the lance's point,

Came rolling through the stubble at his heel.
Thus ran the Arab's tale ; and some that heard
Laughed at the man, and muttered : " O thou fool ! "
Others were troubled, and withdrew apart
Upon a knoll that overlooked the town,
Which now loomed dimly out of the thick haze.

Bagoas passing, caught the Arab's words,
Halted a moment, and then hurried on,
Alert to bear these tidings to his lord,
Whom he was bid to waken at that hour ;
Last night his lord so bade him. At the tent,
Which stood alone in a small plot of ground,
Bagoas paused, and called : " My lord, awake !
I come to wake thee as thou badest me."
But only silence answered ; and again
He called : " My lord, sleep not ! the dawn is here,

And stranger matter ! " Still no answer came.

Then black Bagoas, smiling in his beard

To think in what soft chains his master lay,

Love's captive, drew the leather screen aside

And marvelled, finding no one in the tent

Save Holofernes buried at full length

In the torn canopy. Bagoas stoopt,

And softly lifting up the damask cloth

Beheld the Prince of Asshur lying dead.

As in some breathless wilderness at night

A leopard, pinioned by a falling tree

That takes him unaware curled up in sleep,

Shrieks, and the ghostly echo in her cave

Mimics the cry in every awful key

And sends it flying through her solitudes :

So shrieked Bagoas, so his cry was caught

And voiced from camp to camp, from peak to peak.

Then a great silence fell upon the camps,

And all the people stood like blocks of stone

In a deserted quarry ; then a voice

Blown through a trumpet clamored : *He is dead !*

The Prince is dead ! The Hebrew witch hath slain

Prince Holofernes ! Fly, Assyrians, fly !

Upon the sounding of that baleful voice

A panic seized the silent multitude.

In white dismay from their strong mountain-hold

They broke, and fled. As when the high snows melt,

And down the steep hill-flanks in torrents flow,

Not in one flood, but in a hundred streams :

So to the four winds spread the Asshur hosts,

Leaving their camels tethered at the stake,

Their brave tents standing, and their scattered arms.

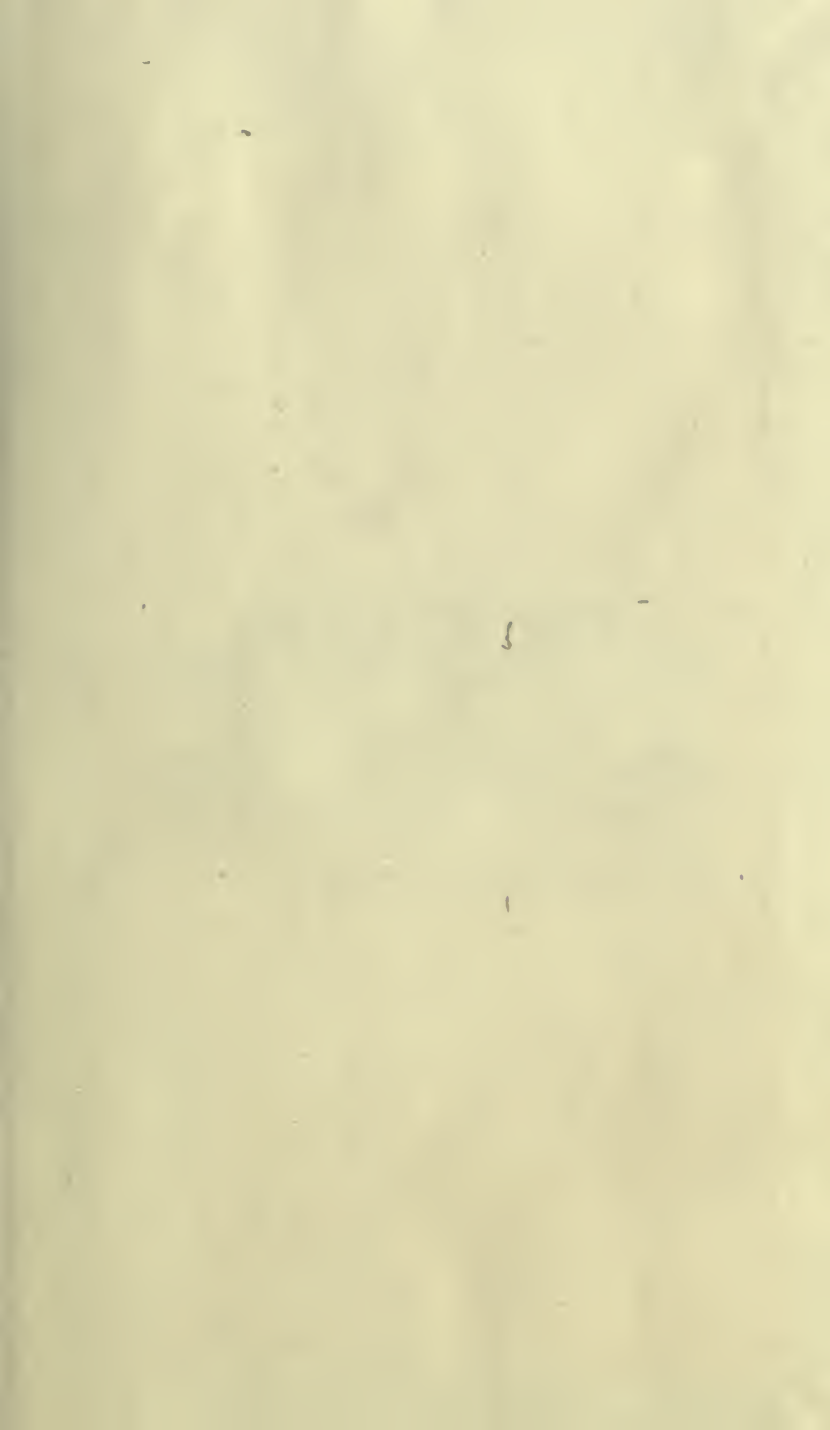
As the pent whirlwind, breaking from its leash,
Seizes upon the yellow desert sand
And hurls it in dark masses, cloud on cloud,
So from the gates of the embattled town
Leapt armèd men upon the flying foe,
And hemmed them in, now on a river's marge,
Now on the brink of some sheer precipice,
Now in the fens, and pierced them with their spears.
Six days, six nights, at point of those red spears
The cohorts fled ; then such as knew not death
Found in Damascus safety, or beyond
Sought refuge, followed only by their fears.

Thus through God's grace, that nerved a gentle hand
Not shaped to wield the deadly blade of war,
The tombs and temples of Judea were saved.
And love and honor waited from that hour

Upon the steps of Judith. And the years
Came to her lightly, dwelling in her house
In her own city ; lightly came the years,
Touching the raven tresses with their snow.
Many desired her, but she put them by
With sweet denial : where Manasseh slept
In his strait sepulchre, there slept her heart.
And there beside him, in the barley-field
Nigh unto Dothaim, they buried her.

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